

(revised)

A COUNTERFEITER'S ARREST PROVES THE
CIRCULATION OF MASSACHUSETTS SILVER
SHILLINGS AS LATE AS 1784

By

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To establish a date when counterfeit coins were being made for circulation proves that genuine pieces of such coin were then in common circulation. Evidence has recently come to light confirming that Massachusetts silver shillings dated 1652 were circulating extensively in New England in 1784, at least 100 years after their last original production. A counterfeiter with good business judgment would not undertake to produce counterfeits of genuine coins if the genuine coins were not in common circulation.

In The New York Journal dated May 13, 1784, p. 3, published by Elizabeth Holt (widow of John Holt who was the printer of Colony of New York paper money dated September 2, 1775 and State of New York paper money dated March 27, 1781) is the following report:

The public will beware of ^{very} counterfeit D O L L A R S, dated 1782. They appear to be well made, and a person who is not cautious would be apt to receive them for good. The composition is supposed to be chiefly copper and antimony - they are very brittle, and on ringing them the sound is shriller than that of good dollars. The marks by which they may be known are as follows; the C in CAROLUS appears to be rather larger than the other letters in the word, and the U is a little lower than the L before it; on the other side of the counterfeit dollars of that date, the words ET. IND. appear like one word thus ETIND. And in the word REX. the X is apparently lower than the RE.

A young fellow by the name of Queen, was lately detected at Sturbridge, with eight of those dollars about him, and a number of utensils for counterfeiting New-England shilling pieces, etc.

It would be of great public utility, if people in general, would be more cautious how they receive money; and upon detecting counterfeit money, endeavor to trace where it came from, that those pests of society, who employ their time in this infamous business, may be brought to the punishment which their crimes merit.

While the primary emphasis in this news report relates to counterfeit 1782 Spanish-American 8 reales pieces, known as Spanish dollars in the United States, the reference to the "counterfeiting of New-England shilling pieces" is most important. New England shilling pieces can only mean Massachusetts silver shillings dated 1652. The counterfeiter was caught in Sturbridge, Massachusetts, with "utensils" to counterfeit Massachusetts silver shillings. The word "utensils" when used in connection with base metal counterfeiting of silver coins indicates tools, instruments or vessels but when identifiable as containing a coin design they must include dies, molds, or patterns for sand molding.

It is not indicated what type of Massachusetts shilling is involved, whether it is a NE type (1652), a Willow Tree type (1653-1660), an Oak Tree type (1660-1667), a large planchet Pine Tree type (1667-1674), or a small planchet Pine Tree type (1675-1682).

The probability is that it was a small planchet type, but that determination does not lessen the impact. The small planchet speculation is based upon the publication in many American coin chart manuals during the 1845-1857 period of illustrations of the small planchet Pine Tree shilling type valued at 16 cents and no other Massachusetts types.

In 1874 and in the periods of economic stability before then the money of account shilling of New England was valued at 6 shillings to the Spanish dollar. At the same time the money of account shilling of New York was only valued at 8 shillings to the Spanish dollar and the money of account shilling of the mid-Atlantic states was valued at 7 shillings 6 pence to the Spanish dollar. These valuations made the Massachusetts silver shillings dated 1652 a convenient coin for commercial transactions in New England, but a very inconvenient coin for use in nearby states to the south. Thus the location of the counterfeiter in Sturbridge, Massachusetts fits into the New-England area scenario where Massachusetts silver coins would normally be preferred for circulation if available. They would be preferred over Spanish-American 2 reales, 1 real or $\frac{1}{2}$ real coins which did not fit well into the New England money of account system in small transactions.

Another important matter in the report concerning 18th century counterfeiting in America is the description of the material used to counterfeit silver coinage. "the composition is supposed to be chiefly copper and antimony". The desired percentage of each such metal in the melt mixture has to produce a silvery color, a weight close to the genuine coin, a good resemblance, sufficient strength and a ringing sound. Copper and antimony when properly mixed have an unusual advantage in having a substantially lower melting point than copper, enabling casting to be more easily done. While the melting point of pure copper is 1100 degrees Fahrenheit, the eutectic of a blend of 32% by weight of antimony reduces the melting point to 645 degrees Fahrenheit. There is a second eutectic of a mixture of 77% by weight of antimony with copper which reduces the melting point to 528 degrees Fahrenheit, thus the counterfeiter has many choices to make in balancing color, weight, appearance, brittleness and sound.

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The report in stating "on ringing them the sound is shriller than that of good dollars" indicates that a common but often unreliable test to see whether a coin was genuine or counterfeit was to spin it on a table top or counter top. This century old practice is still used today. along with balancing the coin on your finger and tapping it to sense a vibration. Biting a coin or other methods to test its brittleness is not commented upon in the report.

Counterfeiting of Massachusetts silver shillings was not a new activity in 1784. In a proceeding in Philadelphia in October 1683 the defendants were accused of "Quining of Spanish Bitts and Boston Money" by adulterating silver with excess copper.¹ Boston money could only mean Massachusetts silver coinage in that quotation.

The above comments as to counterfeiting refer only to counterfeits made to circulate along with genuine pieces and not in any way to forgeries, reproductions or fantasies made to sell to or deceive collectors or other numismatists.²

It is refreshing to have such a small news report furnish a plethora of historical information.

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¹ Edward R. Barnsley, "the First Recorded Trial of Counterfeiters, in America," CNL, p. 628 (Apr. 1978); Walter Breen's Complete Encyclopedia of U.S. and Colonial Coins (New York, 1988), p. 17.

² See Eric P. Newman, The Secret of the Good Samaritan Shilling, ANS Notes and Monographs, No. 142 (NY 1959)